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PHILIPPINE POLITICS

INTRODUCTION

The Republic of the Philippines is a relatively young nation, having been in existence for less than sixty years. Yet, its islands have a very old and rich history - a history that has been influenced by some of the greatest empires and most powerful nations in the history of the world.

The majority of its citizens are of Malay stock, descendants of Indonesians and Malays who migrated to the Philippine islands long before the Christian era of the 16th century. Chinese merchants and traders were the first of the non-Malays to settle in the islands, arriving in the ninth century A.D., and remain its most significant minority group today. Arabs then began to arrive in the 14th century, bringing Islam with them (primarily to the southern islands).

Europeans first appeared in 1521 when Ferdinand Magellan claimed the Philippines for Spain during his circumnavigation of the globe. That period of Spanish rule continued for almost four hundred years and was marked by numerous uprisings, ending in Spain's ceding of the islands to the United States in 1898 as part of the spoils of the Spanish-American war.

America's occupation of the Philippines was also initially marked by a war of Filipino resistance against American rule (1898 to 1902). The U.S. government maintained that U.S. administration of the Philippines was intended to be temporary, pending the development of institutions that would support a free and democratic government and the readiness and ability of the Philippine people to assume responsibility for their own governance. U.S. administration of the Philippines ultimately lasted nearly fifty years, ending in 1946 with Philippine independence following the Second World War (during which the Japanese occupied the islands).

The geography of the Philippines has also played a key role in the nation's history. One of the largest island groups in the world with an archipelago of over 7,100 islands, it enjoys a tropical

climate with almost 50 percent of its land mass classified as tropical forest. It is the size of Texas and much of it is remote and isolated, experiencing little permanent contact with the national government.

The majority of its 80 million populace are located on the main island of Luzon. Filipinos speak nearly ninety different native languages and dialects, with Tagalog and English predominant. It is a nation largely Roman Catholic (83 percent), yet it has a very vocal, albeit small, Muslim element (five percent). Politically, it is broken down into 73 provinces and grouped into 12 regions. An elected governor runs each province.

This paper will discuss several issues within Philippine politics and is intended to expand on topics of particular interest to national security strategy practitioners attempting to better understand this "noisiest democracy in Asia."ⁱ As coordinated with the field studies faculty seminar leader, those topics include: the changing political system; governmental stability and the impact of corruption; the impact of political parties; civil-military relations; judiciary independence; and freedom of the press.

ISSUE: A CHANGING POLITICAL SYSTEM?

BACKGROUND

The Philippines have been governed under three different constitutions in its nearly sixty year history. During that time, the nation has shifted between a U.S.-style presidential system of government and a parliamentary oneⁱⁱ. The current constitution is modeled on the U.S. system and was adopted in 1987. It reestablished a presidential style of government following the abuses of the Marco regime. It features a bicameral legislature of Senate, composed of 24 members elected at large, and House of Representatives, elected both on a district (207

members) and sectoral or party (43 members) basis; as well as an independent judiciary. The president and vice president are elected separately by popular vote. Term limits are in place for both the executive and legislative branch positions and remain popular. The president is limited to a single six-year term. In 1997, on the 35th anniversary of Marco's declaration of martial law, 600,000 protesters took to the streets of Manila to protest against lifting term limits.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Speaker of the Philippine House of Representatives has recently urged President Arroyo to adopt a new constitution creating a unicameral parliamentary government. Most of the Philippine's political parties have agreed to support this initiative, citing a growing deadlock between the executive and legislative branches under the current U.S.-style system. Complaints of an excessively complicated legislative process under the current system as well as the threat of terrorism and the communist and Muslim insurgencies in the south have also been identified as driving factors behind this initiative to fundamentally change the government's structure.^{iv} As will be discussed later in this paper, past experience with a parliamentarian form of government in the Philippines has not necessarily been a positive one.

Questions: What are the prospects for the Philippines to adopt a Parliamentary form of government in the near-term? What is driving this change? How would it differ from the current structure? Is there any concern that such a structure might lead to a repeat of the abuses of the past? What advantage would such a form of government provide that is currently lacking? How would the new constitution be written - through the existing legislature or through a sort of separate constitutional convention? How would the members of such a convention be selected? What impact, if any, have term limits had on the political stability of the Philippines? Do term limits continue to enjoy strong support?

ISSUE: GOVERNMENTAL STABILITY AND THE IMPACT OF CORRUPTION

BACKGROUND

President Ferdinand Marcos, President of the Philippines from 1965 to 1986, declared martial law in 1972 at the end of his normal term of office due to "a threat from subversive forces." He

then ruled largely by decree under the terms of a constitution adopted in 1973, which created a parliamentary system for the nation. Under this constitutional model, he held both the head of state (President) and chief executive (Prime Minister) positions. Control of the media, manipulation of elections, imprisonment and exile of opposition figures, the restriction of civil liberties, and the abuse of human rights marked his time in power. Ending martial law in 1981, Marcos was then reelected to an additional six-year term as President. Unfortunately, his government continued its arrest and detention practices of the past.

The assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino upon his return from exile in 1983 served to coalesce political opposition against Marcos. Marcos then called for snap elections in 1986, which were marred by widespread vote fraud. International observers denounced the results and Marcos was forced to flee the country, taking asylum in Hawaii where he died in 1989.

Corazon Aquino, Benigno Aquino's widow and Marcos' election opponent, was installed as President and a new U.S.-style government and revised constitution were adopted in 1987 (largely returning to the nation's original constitution). Although several unsuccessful coup attempts were made against her, the presidency transferred in 1992 by democratic means to Fidel Ramos (former military Chief of Staff under both Marcos and Aquino). In 1998, Joseph Estrada, a former film star, elected with overwhelming popular support on a platform promising poverty alleviation and an anti-crime crackdown, in turn replaced him.

President Estrada did not complete his term in office. Impeached on charges of corruption in January 2001, Estrada initially refused to step down. Besieged in the presidential palace, Estrada agreed to leave the premises but not to give up the presidency. The nation's Supreme Court then ruled that he had effectively abandoned the office of the President and his Vice President, Gloria

Arroyo, was sworn in as President to complete the remainder of Estrada's term. Estrada has subsequently been arrested and is currently being detained on criminal corruption charges.

President Arroyo has been forced to deal with at least one coup attempt by Estrada's followers, but remains in power with elections scheduled for May 2004. Her focus has been on changing the political culture of the nation by reducing corruption in government and establishing a fairer society.^v Unfortunately, Arroyo's administration has also been dogged by questions of corruption, particularly at the cabinet level.

Questions: While Philippine governments have demonstrated the ability to transition peacefully, such transitions have been equally marked by extraordinary, non-peaceful means. To what do you attribute this instability? Is the phenomenon of "people power" displayed in 1986 and 2001 likely to continue in the future? Why has the Philippines experienced multiple coup attempts in the past ten years? What is President Estrada's current legal status and what effect is his trial having on domestic politics? Is the legitimacy of political administrations an issue in Philippine politics? What impact does continued corruption of governmental officials hold for the future of the Philippines? What can be done to change this apparent culture of corruption?

ISSUE: POLITICAL PARTIES

BACKGROUND

Political parties in the Philippines are often based on personalities as much as ideologies.^{vi} This has often resulted in virtually identical positions between competing political parties. Congressional members in turn tend to have weak party loyalties and often change party affiliation quite easily - especially in attempts to build coalitions and power bases within the Congress itself or to align themselves with the ruling presidential party. In the 1998 elections, President Estrada's party (LAMMP) won 32 percent of the House seats and was soundly in the House minority given the 54 percent of House seats won by the party (Lakas) of outgoing President Ramos. Following the elections, however, 57 percent of the Lakas party representatives switched to the LAMMP party to align themselves with the party in presidential

power. This party switching phenomena tends to become especially acute during the final years of a presidential term of office as the next presidential election campaign begins and the president has only limited patronage to offer.^{vii}

The current practice of electing 43 seats on a party or sector basis (so called party-list seats) has also had a negative impact. Current constitutional law limits a party to no more than 3 party list seats regardless of actual vote totals; ensuring House seats are available for a large number of political parties. This rule was originally designed to prevent stronger parties from dominating the party-list balloting but the three-seat maximum encourages political parties to compete against each other vice forming broader coalitions. This has encouraged a virtual explosion in political or "sector" parties. Over 100 different parties ran for the 43 party list seats in 1998.

Questions: How can political parties in the Philippines be held more accountable? Is there a need or benefit to be gained by restructuring the role of political parties in Philippine politics? Would these same challenges continue under a parliamentary form of government? Is this considered an issue of concern within Philippine politics? What benefit do the party list seats in the House provide?

ISSUE: CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

BACKGROUND

The political history of the Philippines includes multiple instances where the military either participated in successful coups or attempted to unsuccessfully overthrow a democratically elected government. This military involvement in domestic political issues has been lead by the military's leadership as well as by more junior elements. Examples include: the successful coup by the Chief of Staff, Fidel Ramos, and others against Ferdinand Marcos in 1986; multiple unsuccessful coup attempts by elements of the military against Mrs. Aquino between 1986 and 1992; the military service chiefs support of the removal of President Estrada in 1998; and, the

attempt to overthrow Mrs. Arroyo in May 2001 by military officials loyal to President Estrada leading to the declaration of a "state of rebellion" by the Philippine government.^{viii}

Perhaps relatedly, the position of the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces (Chairman equivalent) has become almost a revolving door of late with four different Chiefs in the last twelve months.^{ix} President Arroyo has appointed officers to this post for very short terms - the last incumbent having been in the job for just 79 days - and continues to select officers for the post who are within months of their mandatory retirement age of 56.^x

Questions: What is the cause of this history of military coups against democratically elected governments? Is such military involvement in domestic political matters allowed for in the Philippine constitution? Is this a positive trend for the Philippines? What steps are being taken by the government and the military to stop this from happening in the future? To what do you attribute such a turnover on the Chief of Staff job? Is there a fear of the military on the part of the Philippines elected leadership? What is the long-term impact of this turnover of Armed Forces Chiefs on civil military relations in the Philippines? What is its long-term impact on the performance of the military in its fight against Muslim and communist insurgents?

ISSUE: JUDICIARY INDEPENDENCE

BACKGROUND

Judges enjoy fixed tenure and reasonable compensation under the current Philippine legal system.^{xi} The judiciary has consistently been less criticized than other branches of the government and has shown, during the transition between Presidents Estrada and Arroyo, an ability to rule on matters of the gravest national concern without splintering. Its powers are formerly delineated in law, as is its ability to overrule via legal means the actions of the other primary branches of government. This independence appears to have stood the test of time well, but will face a significant test as the governments war against terrorism within the Philippines expands and pressure builds to strike a new balance between the needs of national security and the rights of individual Filipinos.^{xii}

Questions: To what do you attribute the judiciary branches success in carrying out its duties and sustaining a measure of independence? Are any significant legal reforms envisioned in the near-term? Has the war on Muslim and communist separatists with the Philippines created a strain on the legal system? How has the nation balanced the legal rights of the individual against the need for increased security measures? What is the greatest challenge facing the nation's judicial system?

ISSUE: FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

BACKGROUND

The Philippine press is considered among the freest in the world, yet many argue that it abuses that freedom by routinely publishing unsubstantiated allegations and failing to exercise appropriate journalistic standards.^{xiii} Freedom of expression is a constitutional right in the Philippines and almost anything can be said in media.^{xiv} The press has aggressively publicized government actions and exposed large-scale corruption. Approximately thirty daily newspapers exist across the nation as well as nearly a hundred television stations and several hundred radio stations.^{xv} While the impact of the Internet has not been felt as significantly in the Philippines as in other parts of the world (four percent of the population have regular internet access and personal computers are found in less than two percent of homes), it is growing in importance as a source of information.^{xvi}

Questions: How has freedom of the press impacted the Philippine political process? Are there any threats to freedom of the press? How would a media professional respond to concerns that the press is sometimes "out of control"? Is the media respected within society? Is the media viewed as independent from the government? How has the Internet affected politics? Does the media have an equal impact across the entire nation? If not, what segments of society does it predominantly influence?

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